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## NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY IN BOOK HISTORY

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*This article addresses contemporary trends in the history of the book, focusing on both research and teaching. Given the great complexity of the interdisciplinary study of book science (called 'book history' or 'the history of the book' in North America and Britain, and l'histoire du livre in France), students may be confused or overwhelmed when the subject is introduced. They may legitimately ask what they can expect to learn, and how the subject will be organized. This is especially relevant because their generation has grown up with computers and with digital texts, and also with a cultural discourse of globalization. The article considers the challenges of teaching and learning the history of the book from two points of view, both of which have produced rich results in research over the past twenty to thirty years. The first identifies each individual book as a means of communication and cultural transfer; the second incorporates "the book" as a conceptual category in larger historical narratives working from the perspectives of time and space. While both perspectives can be of value for an introduction to this protean subject, neither offers a fully satisfactory response to the challenge of producing a coherent narrative. There is a discussion of transnational approaches to the history of the book; these are compared favourably to the more limited national approach, but the scholarly impulse to undertake the latter is contextualized. The article concludes with a discussion of Digital Humanities and demonstrates how this new field of study can work collaboratively with scholars in book history.*

*Key words:* book science, book history, communication, literature, pedagogy, nation, transnational, digital humanities.

To the seasoned scholar, and even to the well-trained postgraduate student, the history of the book is notable for its complexity. This history extends far beyond the limits of the familiar volume form to marks on stone and clay, to manuscripts produced

by scribes and on typewriters, and also to pixels on the computer or e-reader screen; it encompasses the human agency that creates, mediates and appropriates the texts carried by these changing marks. This complexity makes generalization difficult, perhaps even

impossible. Even with a focus limited to the printed book in codex format, scholars know that, ultimately, every copy of every book printed from the fifteenth to the early nineteenth century is unique, and that even the superficial uniformity of machine-printed books conceals a complicated web of cultural, economic and political decisions.<sup>1</sup> But if every single book has its own story, how can “book history” or “book science” be presented to novices as a coherent narrative? In this brief article, I will reflect on the challenges inherent in teaching and learning the history of the book by considering those challenges from two wide-ranging points of view. The first identifies each individual book as a means of communication and cultural transfer; the second incorporates “the book” as a conceptual category in larger historical narratives working from the perspectives of time and space. While I will argue that both perspectives can be of value for an introduction to this protean subject, I will also demonstrate that neither offers a fully satisfactory response to the challenge of finding a coherent narrative thread.

I

Students in North America and Britain are often introduced to thinking about the book in historical context by learning what Robert Darnton suggested many years ago: to visualize a circuit that delineates the processes of composition, mediation, production, and reception (in modern western terms,

authorship, publishing / editing, printing / binding / distribution, then reading and reviewing). This “communication circuit” starts with the author, moves on to the publisher (who has the power to make a work public) and the editor and other mediators who collaborate with the publisher to design both text and book, then to printers and other producers (plus shippers and, in Darnton’s case, smugglers); then to readers; and around again, as readers influence the next generation of writers (who are, in turn, readers themselves) [6].<sup>2</sup>

Many scholars have critiqued the communication circuit model, recognizing that it captures only a narrow slice, even of the life of a single book. (What about the movement of a text through time, and through various textual forms and material formats, for example?) In a 2007 article, Darnton himself recognized this shortcoming and also realized that he hadn’t left a space for the survival of the book as an object, collected and collectible, enduring in libraries [7]. The circuit model is a helpful way to think about how books, especially printed ones, come into being. It highlights the elements of the creation story borne by each individual book. For students and scholars new to the field, it provides a useful reminder of how the several elements and processes are typically connected, but the model still doesn’t capture the full complexity of the collective history of the book as a material object that supports a written text.

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<sup>1</sup> For a cogent argument of these problems, see Dane [4, 192].

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<sup>2</sup> For textbooks, see Finkelstein and McCleery [8; 9].

The communication circuit carries an implicit bias in favour of modern individualist concepts of authorship and publishing, concepts which also underpin the disciplinary conventions marking the boundaries of literary, bibliographical, and historical research. In *Old Books & New Histories: An Orientation to Book & Print Culture Studies* I offered an analysis of contemporary scholarship by highlighting the productive tensions among the several academic disciplines within which it is practiced [12]. In North America and the United Kingdom, at least, most of the scholars who identify themselves in terms of “book history” locate their work in one of three disciplines and one of three related perspectives. *Bibliographers* look at “the book” primarily as a discrete material object; *literary scholars* think of “the book” in terms of a specific written text; and *historians* think of “the book” in more abstract terms as a kind of social or cultural transaction. It is difficult to match Darnton’s processes of composition, mediation, production and reception with the three core disciplines, since each process can be thought of from several disciplinary perspectives, and each discipline approaches the various processes in different ways. The balance of interests can be viewed as a metaphorical coin – it is impossible to separate the bibliographical object from the literary text, or the text from the book as they are two sides of the same coin. But when you come to the historian’s special interest, the biblio-coin is used for exchange [14]. Historians are more interested in how “the

book”, conceptualized as an abstract entity, functions in a given society (or as a medium of communication between societies) than in the mechanics of particular texts or specific objects. But despite the fact that disciplinary habits of mind are so powerful, it is not possible fully to separate any of the three aspects of the book from either of the others. Although everyone who defines their research and scholarship in terms of “book history” or “book science” uses all of these approaches, the set of assumptions from the discipline in which they received their intellectual formation is likely to dominate.

In any case, there are more than three disciplines in the twenty-first-century academia with an interest in “the book” – and many of these are concerned with the workings of texts and books in contemporary society, and with modern media. The disciplines of cultural studies and communication studies are inclined to use a more theoretical language than many historians of the book feel comfortable with, such as the work of Freidrich Kittler [17]. Those disciplines tend to think of “the book” in terms of a transaction or exchange, while emphasizing larger patterns of communication, and this contributes to an enriched conceptualization of the study of book culture as inherently interdisciplinary.

Both the communication circuit and the critique in terms of disciplinary boundaries share the tendency artificially to compartmentalize separate aspects of the history of the book, aspects that actually interact with each other. Reading and

reception are not only shaped by mediation; they also help publishers and booksellers – mediators – to establish their policies. Authors themselves, however artistic their motives, are aware of the interest that publishers and readers take in their work. Thinking about production and reception in terms of categories, rather than in terms of individual texts, can be helpful in this respect. Several scholars now undertake research into how various *genres* are written, made public, received and preserved. The standard way, at least in North America, of using the word “genre” – in English literature, for example – is to talk about literary or textual categories (poetry, drama and prose – with the latter subdivided into novel, short story, creative non-fiction and so forth). What has been of more significance to book historians, however, is something we might identify as *subject categories*, where literature is seen in juxtaposition with science, history, philosophy or other subjects. The intellectual and literary categories intersect with other bookly categories, such as the material format or the target market. In Anglo-North American book history focused on the early modern and modern period, the overwhelming majority of studies are about works of literature, especially fiction. Our understanding of literary history is shaped by ever-increasing knowledge of how the processes of authorship, publishing / distribution and reading – of both canonical and non-canonical works – appeared in different cultures. But the circuit of communication made an impact on other histories, too – the histories of

science, of the management of information, and of the historical discipline itself. There is a substantial minority of impressive studies of scientific books; leading scholars include Adrian Johns [15], James Secord [21], and Jonathan Topham [26]. In *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*, Ann Blair explores the techniques by which our predecessors dealt with their own problem of information overload [3]. Some scholars are now entering another subject domain by looking at the publishing history of history books – to show how changes in the realm of book publishing in the nineteenth century intersected with changes in the study of history, in particular the professionalization of history as an academic discipline, as opposed to a narrative literary form [13].

In the book business (and therefore also in the study of book history), however, there are other kinds of categories, some of which are sometimes called genres. One such subdivision is the material format in which a text appears – but the labels for format (hardcover / paperback; trade / mass-market; comic book / graphic novel; various kinds of periodicals; manuscript book; electronic-book, and so forth) tend to relate to the anticipated readership, or target market of the book, rather than to its status as a material object.

Students bring different questions, assumptions, and expectations to the history (or science, or culture) of the book. Their interests may be practical or theoretical, or perhaps a combination of both. The way in

which students will react to a communication circuit, whether or not complicated by genre categories and disciplinary boundaries, will depend on these orientations. For the student preparing for a career in library work, publishing or bookselling, a generalized awareness of the processes by which books come into being, and go into use, will help contextualize their immediate experience. When the point of view is more academic, or theoretical, reference to the broader communication circuit helps to keep the scholar in touch with the larger context into which their specific, perhaps very tightly focused, research project fits.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the books are identified as media of communication and of cultural transfer, a powerful combination of text and material object. Like broadcast and other media, books are framed in terms of forging connections between and among people.

<sup>3</sup> In institutions and jurisdictions where the study of the book has tended to be intellectual and academic rather than applied and career-oriented, teaching programs tend to be interdisciplinary and offered at the graduate level; the instructors involved spend most of their time teaching undergraduates within their own discipline and seldom have the opportunity to engage with colleagues who share their interest in “the book”. (One of the reasons why people enjoy the annual conferences of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing is that those meetings give us an opportunity to be with others who share their interests and assumptions, even if only for a few days). In other institutions and jurisdictions, however, there exists a self-contained discipline of “book history” or “book science” where the training may include a theoretical aspect, but focuses upon practical preparation for careers in publishing, bookselling, and librarianship.

## II

The great French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie once divided historians into two types – the truffle-hunter who combs the archives for detail, and the parachutist who seeks patterns in a totalizing perspective. Students often start with a parachute and only later find themselves searching ardently for the truffles. The totalizing, or universalist, way of looking at the history of books avoids detail in order to insert “the book” into larger historical narratives operating over long periods of time. The most straightforward way to approach it has been to establish a chronology – to start at the beginning, wherever that may be, and keep going until one reaches the present time. Such a project is more complex than it may first appear, whether it is applied to a nation, a political movement or to an abstract concept like the history of the book. What is meant by the terms “book” and “history”? For the purposes of this article, I am defining “the book” as a means of preserving and transmitting information, knowledge, and stories in material form, and “history” in terms of narrative and interpretation. But this definition begs a question: when does the history of the book begin, how does it develop, and where does it end? Is a universal account of book history even possible?

The conventional chronology starts with the substrate and with western Asia: records preserved on clay tablets in Mesopotamia, moving on to writing on papyrus, then parchment, then paper. The format converts from scroll to codex about the second century

CE and then again from manuscript books to printed ones about 1450 with Gutenberg in Mainz. Genres also change over time, notably with religious and scientific works giving way to the “birth of the novel” in the eighteenth century, but handpress printing continues for hundreds of years. The mechanics of book-making start moving forward again beginning in the early nineteenth century with machine-made paper and steam-powered presses. The marketing of books to a wide readership is made possible by various other technological innovations, notably paperback binding in the twentieth century – and the story culminates in the appearance of digital technology in the early twenty-first century.

Academic historians are inclined to resist the teleological notion of “progress” implicit in this well-worn narrative, but the concept is difficult to ignore altogether, especially in the classroom. The model of progress implies that the book has moved or “evolved” from a primitive to a more sophisticated medium; in particular, it has developed from a primitive to a more sophisticated means of preserving and transmitting information, knowledge, and stories. One of the challenges of instilling a sense of historical-mindedness in students is helping them to overcome simplistic notions of progress and to situate historical events, lives, and objects in specific temporal and geographical contexts. At the outset of a course of study, however, the simple chronology offers advantages to the instructor setting out to introduce the history of the book to undergraduates. Five major

turning points can be reduced to fifty words: *manuscript codex replaces the unwieldy scroll; printing with moveable type makes authorship, publishing, and reading accessible to elites; steam-powered technology extends accessibility to ordinary people; mass-market publishing in paperback makes the book a commodity; digital technology changes everything – the format of books, their production and marketing, and the reading experience.* Scholars will easily identify the biases and oversimplifications inherent in a mini-history thus set out, but many generations of students have encountered such a streamlined narrative and used it as a base upon which to build a more complex story, and ultimately their own critical analysis.

Research over the past twenty years has critiqued the universal chronological narrative from two directions – the national and the global. Established scholars who specialize in literary history, bibliography, media studies and related subjects have acted upon a strong impulse to write a nationally-focused history of the book, organized around the literary and media history of their own country. Meanwhile a later cohort, including students of the scholars who are writing national histories, are calling for a globalized perspective capable of responding to their generation’s values.

For many scholars (and for some publishers), the self-evident way of thinking about “book history” has been in national terms: to particularize the universal narrative and establish the definitive history of authorship and knowledge production, of printing and

publishing, and of reading and scholarship for their own country. Significant resources of research grants, publishing capital, and government funding have gone into producing multi-volume histories of the book in various national configurations. Perhaps, especially for scholars whose intellectual formation took place in the 1950s and 1960s, it was the national narratives that mattered. And each country's experience—of authorship, of publishing and distribution, and of reading and reception—was different, sometimes in unexpected ways that had to be uncovered by painstaking research and announced in conference papers that preceded the multi-volume books. But the nation-state approach is also about theory, a theory of nationalism and national identity, which goes much deeper than friendly competition between the book historians of various places. Numerous scholars and students have been persuaded by Benedict Anderson's idea that readers form an "imagined community" whereby they define themselves in national terms because they think of themselves as reading the same novel, or the same newspaper, as someone else in the same country [1]. But Dallas Liddle [18], Sydney Shep [22] and others are using the study of material books in historical context to critique and unsettle Anderson's influential theory.

Perhaps ungratefully after all the energy devoted to writing national histories, some commentators have begun to ask an awkward question. In an industry where the raw materials, the skilled producers,

the investment capital, the products, and the customers all cross national boundaries constantly, why should "nation" be the defining paradigm? Similar questions have been asked in the broader historical profession, where an interest has developed in a globalizing or totalizing history, where accounts of imperial power are upended by examining them from the point of view of colonial resistance. Scholars reason that it should be possible to consider both sides of the imperial / colonial transaction, and the way they affect each other, at the same time. Some even speak of an "entangled" history (*l'histoire croisée*) [28]. One example of a transnational history of the book is *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* by Isabel Hofmeyr who is based in South Africa [11]. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is thought of as a quintessentially English book rooted in the English Reformation, along with the Bible, likely to be the only book owned by working people right through the nineteenth century. Hofmeyr convincingly recasts it as an African book; she finds many editions in African languages, with illustrations and variant translations, each of which appropriated the text for African purposes. She argues that it was this appropriation (or rather, it was a reaction to this appropriation) that actually caused the identification of *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a typically English book. So the colonial "peripheries" were "writing back" (as postcolonial literary theory puts it) [2] to the imperial centre, and inscribing their own perceptions and preoccupations



on books, even literary classics, which had been created a long way from where they were being recovered. Other historians of the book, notably Robert Fraser [10] and Sydney Shep [22], have followed Hofmeyr in seeing the possibilities for removing the unnatural barriers of nation and state in our accounts of what happens to a book over the course of years, decades or centuries, as its composers, producers and consumers move – not in a decorous circuit handing the book on from one to the next – but undertaking vast journeys across and around the world, taking texts and books along and transforming them in the process. In my experience, students are receptive to an approach like this, one that upsets preconceived ideas and offers attractive alternatives.

The transnational approach is not distinct, however, from the chronological, the national, the communication circuit or disciplinary boundaries. In this context, it is useful to return to something Darnton wrote in 1994:

“[In spite of] the internationalization of the field, one can still detect national accents among book historians. The English tend to emphasize analytical bibliography and printing; the French, quantification and socio-cultural history; the Germans, economics and the book trade. Those emphases derive from the erudite traditions of the nineteenth century, and to a large extent they correspond to the nature of the documents available in each country... In moments of pessimism I sometimes think that the pattern of book history looks different in each country simply because each country has preserved a different kind of source material” [5, 3].

This passage was written around the time most of the national histories of the book were being founded as research and publishing projects.

If one were to map the three core book-history disciplines on to what Darnton said at that time, “the English” would be the bibliographers (and the literary scholars) interested in the text in relation to the material object, and “the French” would be the historians doing quantification and socio-cultural history, as would “the Germans” with an alternative historical focus on economics and trade. But merely to attempt such a mapping is to see it dissolve. For one thing, the “history-from-below” tradition in Britain (associated with E.P. Thompson) is another way of doing social and cultural history and the one that is very attentive to trends in the print culture [25]. And scholarship in continental Europe is attentive to materiality, although not from the analytical-bibliography point of view. All these national scholarly traditions also work with material texts (either literary texts, or with journalism in the form of newspaper history). So Darnton’s “national accents” can be muted to some extent. His “moment of pessimism”, though, conveys a crucial point about the different kinds of source material each country has preserved. In the case of Germany, it is the archival record, rather than the national propensity, which makes the history of the book in Germany seem to be about trade. Certainly for Britain, very few booksellers’ records have survived, and those who study Britain also don’t have ways to trace the production of cheap tracts that



were equivalent of the “bibliotheque bleu” in early modern France. Apart from the vagaries of archival survival, the differences from one nation’s book culture to another have more to do with the ways in which the practices of making, distributing and reading books differed (and still differ) from one place to the other than with their “erudite traditions”. Nor do many books remain in the nation where they were first written and read.

While all this research and theorizing about the history of the book has been going on among scholars, the world has gone through two or three decades of profound transformation. Old political alignments and conflicts have given way to new tensions and fresh challenges. The economic and cultural developments, often labelled “globalization”, have altered many assumptions and conventions. And the rapid developments of the internet and of digitization have affected every aspect of the book in contemporary society. Professors are discovering, sometimes to their chagrin, that students don’t learn the way their parents and grandparents used to do. And young people, including university students, share the values that shape their perspective on their studies – values about the environment and about racial and gender equality, for example. Students in 2013 may balk at the assumptions inherent in both the communication circuit and in the standard chronology. Because they are citizens of a globalized world and feel as comfortable with digital texts as seventeenth-century children did with printed books, they are liable to

object to the Eurocentric character of these simplified accounts. Neither allows for the history of the book in Asia, for example, where pictographic writing systems have meant different developments in relation to printing [19]. Even in the European context, there is no room in the circuit model or the universal chronology for specific regional histories – the persistence of handwritten books in Finland [20], or the resistance in Lithuania to the banning of the national press in the nineteenth century [24]. Nor does the narrative apply to any situation where we want to take into account the writing systems used by aboriginal people; in the case of Canada, Germaine Warkentin argues that we should learn to think of the beaded wampum belts used by some native-Canadian tribal groups as a form of “text” – and therefore to think of the history of the book in Canada beginning with native peoples’ writing systems, rather than with introduction of the first printing press in the eighteenth century [27]. As a result of these attitudes, not least of which is the independent thinking characteristic of contemporary students, both the circuit model and the universal chronology become more useful as introductions to the complexity of the study of book culture than ends in themselves.

### III

Since about 2011, digital humanities has become a very significant trend in literary and historical scholarship, although “humanities computing” dates back to the 1940s. The terms embrace a number of methodologies

and theoretical approaches to bringing the computational power of digital technology to bear on the problems of humanities scholarship, such as the analysis of texts and of movements in human geography. Digital humanists trace trends by parsing large chunks of text in machine-readable form, by mapping trade statistics using the Geographic Information Systems software, and by developing various ways of visualizing trends drawn out of large bodies of data. A number of scholars in this field are driven by a consciousness of the parallels between the Gutenberg moment of 1450 and our contemporary transition from the printed page to digital devices. Already digitalization and the internet have affected the experiences of authorship, publishing, and reading. Scholars such as Ray Siemens [23] and Matthew Kirschenbaum [16] are working to interpret the way we use new technologies by bringing to bear their deep understanding of the way the printed page has been designed, produced, and used in the past. This is not a simple matter of “history repeating itself”, but rather of a contemporary technological revolution helping us to contextualize the technologies of print-on-paper that the twentieth century took for granted.

Students encountering the history of the book for the first time in university classrooms do not regard the printed book as an unproblematic (because over-familiar) technology in the way their parents and grandparents did. But while they approach the digital book and related

media such as websites with nonchalance, they are also acutely aware of changing technology, because such changes have been their life experience. People in their twenties and younger are sometimes called “digital natives” – as opposed to the “digital immigrants” who remember arriving on the shores of computer-based textuality. One of my students once wrote in her final examination paper for a course on the history of the book: “The book is a shape-shifter” [12, 3]. It was deeply gratifying to see the complex knowledge of generations of scholars translated, through my teaching, into the language of popular culture.

To approach the history of the book by a chronology is to pose serious questions about its beginning and its contemporary manifestation. The scholars working on these two aspects, archaeologists and anthropologists at one end and digital humanists at the other, share some assumptions about “the book” with the literary, library and historical scholars who focus on books from the middle ages to the twentieth century. The latter group have developed such concepts as a communication circuit, a focus on both national and transnational narratives, and critiques of disciplinary and category boundaries. The lesson taught to newcomers is also constantly being re-learned by experts: the texts of books change over time, the material format keeps shifting, too, and the ways we use the book in various societies transform along with text and format.

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## NAUJOS KNYGOS ISTORIJOS TYRIMŲ IR PEDAGOGIKOS KRYPTYS

LESLIE HOWSAM

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamos naujos knygos istorijos – tiek teorijos, tiek mokymo pedagogikos kryptys. Atsižvelgiant į tai, koks sudėtingas yra tarpdisciplininis mokymas apie knygas (Šiaurės Amerikoje ir Britanijoje vadinamas „book history“ arba „the history of the book“, Prancūzijoje – „l’histoire du livre“), jį studijuojantys asmenys sutrinka ir pasimeta pradėdami pažinti su šiuo dalyku. Jie visiškai teisėtai klausia, ko juos siekiama išmokyti ir kaip mokomasis dalykas bus pateikiamas. Tai ypač svarbu, nes naujoji karta išaugo kompiuterių ir skaitmeninių tekstų terpėje. Be to, reikia atsižvelgti į kultūrinio diskurso globalizaciją. Straipsnyje nagrinėjamos knygos istorijos mokymo bei mokymosi problemos dviem požiūriais, kurie per pastaruosius du tris dešimtmečius davė vaisingų tyrinėjimo

rezultatų. Pirmuoju požiūriu kiekviena atskira knyga identifikuojama kaip komunikacijos ir kultūrinių mainų priemonė, o antruoju – į „knygą“ žvelgiama kaip į konceptualinę kategoriją platesnėje laiko ir erdvės veikiamoje istorinėje pasakojimo erdvėje. Nors abu požiūriai gali būti vertingi pristatant tokį takų dalyką, nė vienas iš jų neduoda visiškai patenkinamo atsakymo, kaip reikėtų konstruoti rišlų pasakojimą. Diskutuojama apie tarptautinės knygos istorijos įžvalgą, kurios vertinamos palankiau negu labiau ribotos tautinės, tačiau tyrėjui kyla noras visa tai labiau kontekstualizuoti. Straipsnio pabaigoje aptariama skaitmeninės humanitarikos sąvoka ir būdai, kaip šiame naujame mokslinių tyrimų bare galėtų bendradarbiauti knygos istorijos tyrėjai.

Įteikta 2013 m. sausio mėn.